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## Children, young people and the language of harm and abuse

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## Editorial

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This issue of the Journal focuses specifically on the theme of young people with abusive sexual behaviours. The idea for such a special issue came initially from our joint involvement in the second biennial conference of the European Society working with Sexually Abusive Youth (ESSAY) entitled 'European perspectives on young people who sexually abuse; the individual, the family and the network' which was held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, from 23rd to 25th May 2005. The diversity of presentations at the ESSAY conference, as well as the sheer energy and commitment of those practitioners and researchers participating at this event, encouraged us to think about the value of bringing together a collection of largely European based papers on the theme of young people. In total, there are nine papers offered in this special issue, as well as a series of book reviews similarly focusing on adolescents. Seven papers contained herein reflect the work of some of the leading contributors to the field in Europe. Additionally, two papers are presented from New Zealand, offering a valuable perspective on the current thinking about treatment issues and models with young people.

One of us has previously distinguished different types of research that can inform practice in the adolescent sexual aggression field (Hackett, 2004). First, *exploratory* or *descriptive studies* can help to identify the nature or characteristics of sexual abuse perpetrated by children and young people, as well as their backgrounds, previous life experiences, family context, etc. Such research is clearly relevant in helping to define the nature of the group of young people who present with sexually abusive behaviours. This has been, perhaps, the most common type of study undertaken in the adolescent

field to date, although there are relatively few published descriptive studies of European samples of young people. Second, *comparative studies* can help practitioners and policy makers set what is known about young people who have sexually abused against what is known about other groups of young people. Typically, studies in the adolescent field compare adolescents presenting with sexually abusive behaviours with non-sexually offending delinquents, with a limited number of studies also including a 'normative' community control group. Such research is helpful in giving some answers to one of the most enduring questions for practitioners in the field; that is, how different are young people who abuse from not only adult sex offenders, but also their non-sexually offending peers? Third, *evaluative* or *outcome studies* can help to inform judgements about the likelihood that sexually abusive behaviours will progress and escalate and the most appropriate and effective ways of addressing sexual behaviour problems in young people. This kind of research is, perhaps, least developed in the adolescent sexual aggression field to date.

Taken collectively, the papers included in this special issue provide some important empirical support across these important research areas. **Hutton and Whyte** report findings from a multi-site descriptive study of the characteristics of a Scottish sample of young people who have sexually abused. **Moutrie** describes some preliminary, but very important research, on a small sample of young people who have downloaded child pornography. The extent to which young 'downloaders' may be similar or different to adult child pornography downloaders is considered. **De Bruijn and colleagues** describe the unwanted sexual behaviour of a large

group of 1,700 Dutch adolescents. This study adds to what is known about sexual behaviours and sexual risk taking in normative groups of young people; information which is clearly important for practitioners in the sexual aggression field. **Almond and colleagues** go beyond simple descriptive research and use a multi-dimensional scaling procedure known as 'Smallest Space Analysis' to explore the characteristics of 300 young people referred to two specialist services working with sexually abusive adolescents. They provide empirical evidence for their hypothesis that young people predominantly fall into one of three dominant background types. This lends support to the existence of what the authors suggest are three distinct "syndromes" that underlie youthful sexual abuse.

Three studies herein fall within the 'comparative' research category. In their Dutch study, **Van Outsem and colleagues** compare personality characteristics, as measured by the 'ASAP' assessment measures proposed by Richard Beckett, among groups of young sex offenders, non-sex offenders and a representative sample of non-delinquent youth. Few, and relatively small, differences in personality characteristics were found between these three groups and the authors discuss the relevance of their findings in relation to treatment approaches for different subgroups of young people who sexually abuse others. In another Dutch study, **Bullens and colleagues** explore and compare the criminal careers of adolescent sex offenders and non-sex offenders over a seven year period. They report that most of the young people in their sample who were identified initially for sexual offences did not recidivate in a sexual way, but were more likely to generalize their criminality into a broader pattern of non-sexual offences over time. Again the core message from the authors is that different criminal careers reflect different treatment needs. **Whittaker and colleagues** report their study into levels of sexual knowledge and empathy that differentiate 221 male adolescent child molesters and a normative comparison group of 55 male

non-offending adolescents. Finding that adolescent sexual offenders had less sexual knowledge and less victim empathy skills than non-offending adolescents, the authors outline the implications of their study for effective intervention responses.

Finally, two studies are offered which focus specifically upon, and describe, practice models and approaches with young people and their families. **Lambie and Seymour** take stock of the developments in the field in New Zealand and shifts in approach towards individualized treatment programmes for young people and their families. **Ayland and West** focus on their work with young people with learning disabilities, describing how they have been able to apply the 'Good Way Model' to good effect with this specific user group.

Despite their varying focus and different methodological approaches, it is notable that some key messages emerge across many of the papers here. There is ample illustration of the degree of heterogeneity within the overall population of young people who sexually abuse others. The evidence here also supports the call for individualized, holistic and multi-modal treatment programmes. In their totality, we hope that the nine papers offered here will make an important contribution to continuing debates on sexually abusive adolescents. If you work with children and adolescents, the relevance of these papers to your practice will be clear. However, with the increasing emphasis on developmental perspectives across the whole of the sex offender field, we suggest that the findings and models described here will also be of significance and salience to readers whose work is primarily with adult sex offenders. Adolescents do not remain adolescents forever.

*Simon Hackett and Ruud Bullens*  
June 2006

## Reference

- Hackett, S. (2004). *What Works for Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours?* Barnardo's.

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